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Summer 7-2002

### Standardized assessment: A Look at Tennessee's assessment system: Will authentic assessment work in our schools?

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*University of Tennessee - Knoxville*

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## UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

### SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

Name: Jessica Holman

College: Human Ecology Department: Child & Family Studies

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Gail Mosby

PROJECT TITLE: Standardized assessment: A Look at Tennessee's  
assessment system: Will authentic assessment work  
in our schools?

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: Paul Mosby, Faculty Mentor

Date: 7-30-02

Comments (Optional):

Jessica's research can have implications for better understanding the nuances of assessment in multicultural context. There are many directions in which she could go with this research and there are challenging projects to pursue.

**UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM**  
**SENIOR PROJECT - PROSPECTUS**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

College: \_\_\_\_\_ Department: \_\_\_\_\_

Faculty Mentor: \_\_\_\_\_

PROJECT TITLE: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

PROJECT DESCRIPTION (Attach not more than one additional page, if necessary):

Projected completion date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

.....  
I have discussed this research proposal with this student and agree to serve in an advisory role, as faculty mentor, and to certify the acceptability of the completed project.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_, Faculty Mentor

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Return this completed form to The University Honors Program, F101 Melrose Hall,  
following your first presentation in the Senior Project Seminar.**

## SENIOR PROJECT COMPONENTS

### CHECK LIST

Note: Not all components will necessarily be appropriate parts of every honors project. Most likely parts are marked. Discuss with your faculty mentor the components that are necessary or relevant to your project.

- ☒ 1. Abstract
- ☒ 2. Title page
- ☒ 3. Introduction
- ☐ 4. Review of literature (may be part of the Introduction, or in some projects the focus of the entire project)
- ☒ 5. Purpose statement/Statement of problem/Hypotheses
- ☐ 8. Analysis of data
- ☐ 9. Conclusions
- ☐ 10. Recommendations for future work
- ☒ 11. Bibliography/References
- ☐ 12. Style guide (refer to a professional journal in your field)
- ☐ 13. Visuals (original work, copied works of others)
- ☐ 14. Figures/charts/tables
- ☐ 15. Appendix
- ☒ 16. Approval Form Signed by the Faculty Mentor – copy in the Honors Handbook
- ☐ 17. Table of Contents (usually necessary only in very long projects with multiple headings)

### TYPES OF PROJECTS:

- 1. Creative – fine arts, literary
- 2. Analytical – historical, non-experimental science, critical review, survey
- 3. Experimental – science, technology

**Standardized Assessment- A Look at Tennessee's Assessment system:  
Will authentic assessment work in our public schools?**

By  
Jessica E. Holman

Honors Senior Project  
Dr. Gail Mosby, faculty mentor  
Dr. Thomas Broadhead, Honors program director

**Standardized Assessment: A Look at Tennessee's Terra Nova Test**  
*Abstract\**

My senior project focuses on assessment practices within the field of elementary school education, specifically standardized achievement tests. Interest in this topic arose from a multicultural education class I took last spring, and a class I am currently taking, which is Assessment in early childhood programs. Most standardized tests are norm- referenced multiple choice tests, are heavily weighted, and most state systems do not offer alternatives to standardized tests for children with special needs beyond that of the typical student. Research has concluded that these factors allow some students to be placed at a disadvantage based on flaws in the test and other factors that may influence results.

The purpose of my paper is to provide a view of the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program and to research any unrecommended practices contained therein that may negatively influence student scores, school report cards, and classroom curriculum practices. I am interested in pursuing a career in the field of educational research and assessment test development, so this project is very relevant to and will benefit my future academic endeavors.

My final project and paper is not yet complete because I am still in the process of conducting research. My research up to this point has found that the construction of the TCAP test is not favorable to all of its students and contains some discrepancies. However, specific demographic data related to TCAP scores is not available. Thus my project focus has shifted slightly. I anticipate the completion of my project in early January of 2002.

*\*submitted to Dr. Thomas W. Broadhead on November 14, 2001*

***Introduction:***  
**My learning process through the research project**  
***(A reflection piece)***

This project has undergone several metamorphoses since its beginning in Fall 2001. My original prospectus was one more indicative of graduate level work, and the scope of the project needed to be narrowed down. After narrowing down my field of ideas for my senior thesis, I began to collect research on the topic of standardized assessment, specifically Tennessee's standardized exam, the Terra Nova test. I embarked on this topic for several reasons. The first reason is that I feel so strongly against standardized forms of assessment. I am against it for the main reason that standardized assessment may contain items that are prepared for children/ students of a certain ethnic group or social class; therefore other children are placed at an automatic disadvantage, only for their scores to be directly compared with those "advantaged" children to be judged for success or failure.

I originally wanted to research any practices in the Tennessee comprehensive exam that were biased towards individual or student groups. I learned throughout my academic quest that this information was very difficult to come by, as this information is very confidential and must remain within the testing company (in Tennessee's case, McGraw- Hill). My project underwent another series of changes as I conducted my research. Since I could not obtain any actual testing items or information about the Terra Nova, I sought to explore Tennessee's scores from three different geographical regions (East, Middle, and West Tennessee) and compare them. I also wanted to compare three different rural schools to three different metropolitan schools within each region. These

schools would be similar in population and other demographical characteristics. Much of my research in that area was inconclusive.

As I contemplated changing topics for my senior project, I realized that focusing on specific schools in the state or specifics about the exam were largely inconclusive. I dug deeper into my research and applied information learned about assessment in my undergraduate classes. Then I got this idea: *What if I compared standardized assessment to portfolio- style assessment* (which, in more recent educational practices, is highly recommended) *and devised a practical way that portfolio assessment can be implemented into the public school system?*

My estimated project completion date was January 2002. I realized I may have something here...so I waited, experienced, and I observed. Spring 2002, I was enrolled in a Child & Family Studies 422 (ECE IV) in which I had a pre- student teaching experience in the public schools 9 hours a week. It was during this time where I got a chance to be one of the teachers to administer the Terra Nova test to a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade class. This experience proved fruitful in my project investigation, because from this I gathered first- hand knowledge and experience as a teacher administering the test, and I was able to observe children's reactions to the test.

Currently, I am taking Child & Family Studies 470 and 471 (these two classes together is the Child Development Laboratories student teaching experience). In this teaching experience as a part of my requirements, I had to assess 3 children using *authentic assessment*, or portfolio assessment. I am just finishing up my assessment portfolios for the three children. This experience has contributed much to my research as



well, because now I have experience in both types of assessment as a teacher and can give an accurate and realistic comparison.

This brings me to my current level of research in this area, which is examining the two practices (standardized vs. portfolio) and using the information I know about each and applying it for practical use. I feel that, contrary to many theories, portfolio assessment *can* be successfully implemented in public school system. But like any innovative idea, paradigm, and/ or systematic advantage, it would require several changes at the staff and administrative level. It would change the way that Tennessee *does* education. In the summary of my research and teaching experiences from the past ten months, I seek to answer this question: *will authentic assessment work in our public schools?*

### ***Purpose Statement***

In this project, I seek to provide information about different methods of assessment in the field of education. I will use my experiences as a student- teacher in the field of early childhood education to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of each method. In conclusion, I hope to provide suggestions on how authentic assessment could be implemented into the public school system.

### *Analysis of Data*

#### **Standardized Assessment- A Look at Tennessee's Assessment system:**

Will authentic assessment work in our public schools?

#### **Assessment's role in Education- what are the different types of assessment and what do the results show?**

Several initial questions arise even before the research unfolds. What exactly is assessment? Why is it needed in education, and more specifically, why is it necessary in the early childhood years? These questions are raised and addressed by Wortham (2001). Assessment has several meanings in several different contexts. Goodwin and Goodwin (1982) describe it as "the process of determining, through observation or testing, an individual's traits or behaviors, a program's characteristics, or the properties of some other entity, and then assigning a number, rating, or score to that determination" (Wortham, 2001). There are several different types of assessment used in schools. Formal assessment, often includes standardized tests, norm- referenced tests, and criterion-referenced tests (Wortham, 2001). These can be used with either pre- school aged children or school aged children. Informal assessments include observation, checklists, rating scales, rubrics, and teacher designed tests (Wortham, 2001). According to Wortham, informal assessments can also include performance based strategies, such as authentic assessment and portfolio assessment (2001).

Assessment in the educational arena also depends on the age of the child. For younger children, assessment is done in a different manner than that of older children and even adults, due to the fact that pre- preschool infants cannot read or write. Typical developmental changes are monitored to see if the child is progressing at a normal rate or not (Wortham, 2001).

Assessment may also provide other types of information. For example, typically a standardized exam will not only measure the performance of an individual student, but will also provide information about the quality of the school or school system.

“Norm- referenced and criterion- referenced achievement tests can provide valuable information regarding the effectiveness of curriculum and instruction” (Wortham, 2001). Achievement tests can also demonstrate how well children learned the content of a program, and teachers can use the test results to determine how to reteach or change program content and/ or instructional methods (Wortham, 2001). These are among the advantages of the results of standardized tests. Sometimes this additional information can be detrimental for those involved, depending on the nature of the test.

**Does standardized assessment place some children at an educational disadvantage?**

“Test designers”, according to Wortham, “have found it impossible to develop a culture free test” (Cordes, 1985; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1993). However, all too often tests are used to “sort” and “label” the successful students from the failure students. According to Samuda, et al., minority children have always been victims of the social and economic consequences from standardized exams (1998). The other information test results provide extends beyond issues related to school system use (Samuda, et al.). “Tests can have dire social and economic consequences for those individuals who are labeled and placed in minimal curricular programs, and thus curtailed from further secondary or tertiary education. Tests and their results, therefore, can bring disastrous outcomes affecting the lives and aspirations of minorities in any society” (Samuda, et al.).

In addition to being detrimental to ethnic minorities, some forms of assessment also have consequences for children who are diagnosed as having special needs. By law,

children with special needs in a public educational setting are required to have an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) or an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) (Allen & Schwartz, 2001). According to FairTest's Assessment Reform Network, standardized forms of assessment often do not allow adequate and appropriate accommodations and adaptations for children with an IEP. The goal of the network is to "open new doors for disadvantaged children and improve the quality of education for everyone by helping to improve assessment systems."

Standardized testing also threatens inclusion and multiculturalism, which are now viewed as recommended practices in the field of ECE. To be a recommended practice, strategies used at a school or Child development center must be compatible with the following principles: research- based or value- based, family- centered, multicultural in emphasis, cross- disciplinary, developmentally/ chronologically age appropriate, and normalized (Allen & Schwartz, 2001). "Multicultural in emphasis" refers to 'celebrating the concept of family uniqueness' (Allen & Schwartz, 2001). According to Allen & Schwartz, family uniqueness encompasses ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and racial differences as well as the unique history and traditions of individual families (2001).

According to Bigelow, standardized tests threaten multiculturalism (1999). His research is based on Oregon's current assessment system, specifically the way the social studies tests are formulated. "Social studies standardization threatens a multicultural curriculum- one that attempts to explain the world as it really exists; speaks to the diversity of our society; and aims not only to teach important facts, but also to develop citizens who can make the world safer and more just" (Bigelow, 1999). Multiculturalism, according to Bigelow, is "a search to discover perspectives that have been silenced in

traditional scholastic narratives. Multiculturalism attempts to uncover ‘the histories and experiences of the people who have been left out of the curriculum’ ” (Bigelow, 1999).

### **A solution to the problem**

The research has illustrated the destructive effects of standardized testing. This form of assessment has marred generations of students from different ethnic backgrounds and cultures children with special needs. It has threatened multiculturalism and inclusion, which are recommended as best practices in education (Allen & Schwartz, 2001). One obvious solution to the problem is for schools who rely solely on high- stakes, norm-referenced tests to change to a different type of assessment- *authentic* assessment.

The primary difference between authentic assessment and standardized assessment is that authentic assessment highlights what the child *can* do, not what they *cannot* do. Standardized assessment also compares a child’s performance to that of other children. Authentic assessment is meaningful and a more child- or student- centered way to assess learning. “It is [authentic assessment] designed to present a broader, more genuine picture of student learning” (Wortham, 2001). In addition to capturing a truer sense of what a student knows, it also shows progress as well as achievement (Wortham, 2001). In the early childhood years, a child’s learning process (or progression) is more important than the product (the achievement score or final product). “They [portfolios] keep track of a child’s progress—in other words, they follow the child’s success rather than his failure” (Grace, 1991).

### **How is performance- based assessment used? What is the role of the teacher?**

Another problem with state- mandated standardized testing is that teachers end up “teaching to the test.” This is a phenomenon in which teachers are not teaching content

appropriate to the students level of development, but instead teaching only what will be tested. “A longstanding criticism of standardized testing is that teachers learn to “teach to the test”—substituting the shallow content of test preparation for more challenging curriculums and more sophisticated skills” (Miller, 2001).

Performance- based assessment has several purposes. One is that performance-based strategies are most appropriate for young children (Wortham, 2001). In addition to this, Wortham (2001) also cites three other purposes of standardized assessment. “Performance assessments are integrally related to instruction (as opposed to “teaching the test”), and that performance assessments are used to evaluate whether preschool programs are meeting the needs of the young students” (Wortham, 2001).

The role of the teacher using a portfolio assessment is different from the role the teacher takes in standardized testing. One benefit of portfolio assessment is the higher level of involvement the teacher takes in the children’s learning. According to Wortham, it requires a different role of the teacher in that there is a “continual interaction with student work” (2001). “The teacher engages in dialogues, questioning, suggesting, observing, and guiding to encourage students” (Wortham, 2001). From the closer level of interaction with student work, teachers also gain valuable knowledge about how children learn or how cognitive processes develop. “Performance assessments permit teachers to understand the processes children use to learn and how they actively construct meaning through analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Wortham, 2001: Brown, 1989; Harrington, Meisels, McMahon, Dichtelmiller, & Jablon, 1997; Meisels, 1993).

**My personal experiences with performance- based assessment strategies and standardized assessment as a teacher:**

This past spring, I was a pre- internship student teacher at Christenberry elementary school. In my pre- internship placement, I got to experience first- hand what it was like to administer the Terra Nova test to a class. I was placed in a second grade class and could note several disadvantages to that method of testing. The first is the level of stress it places on the students. Several of my students complained of headaches and stomachaches the days of testing, due to the long hours and tedious work that it requires. My teachers scheduled a few “stress- relieving” break sessions for their students (my placement was in a class that was “team- taught”). According to these teachers, the children at Christenberry “often score lowest in the system” and they feel as if they have “failed” when they get the results. Most of the children at Christenberry are from low-income homes and environments.

As I proctored the test and monitored the room during testing, I noticed that some children who progressed to a certain level and who had certain abilities in a skill or subject area, missed questions in that skill or subject area, due to outside factors. One such factor is the pressure of the test. Also, because of the standardized nature of the exam, we (as teachers) were unable to give assistance or to clarify terms in the vocabulary/ language arts section. Many of our children did not do well in that section, because they had not heard those terms in their everyday language and environments.

Currently, I am student teaching at the pre- school level and have just completed 3 separate and distinct focused portfolios. These portfolio assessments definitely focus on what the child can do and how the child has improved in developmental domains. The



teacher collects observations in each developmental domain. These domains are personal awareness, emotional well-being, socialization, cognition, communication, and perceptual motor. This is appropriate for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers (Gronlund & Engel, 2001). For grades K- 4, these areas can be work samples and observations made in different subject areas (language arts, math, science, etc.) An example of an observation from a preschool focused portfolio is on pp. 15- 16. Names of the children have been deleted and replaced with an asterisk (\*) to maintain confidentiality.

### **Will authentic assessment work in our public schools?**

For the conclusion of my research project, I want to provide a professional view on the topics I have presented. I interviewed Dr. Paula Hughes from the Department of Child and Family Studies. Dr. Hughes has her PhD in psychology and has worked as a licensed child psychologist in the public and private school settings. She currently serves as the director of the Early Childhood Inclusion program and assistant director of the UT Child Development Labs. She also advises teachers in the CDL on how to conduct portfolio assessments.

1. In your opinion, can a portfolio assessment successfully be used in the public school setting?

*Yes, I have seen it implemented successfully. It can be successful if teachers make the necessary adaptations. Portfolio assessment provides a closer look at each child as an individual. If you are a teacher in a public school setting with 28 children in your class, it will be impossible to get portfolios with work samples, anecdotes, and checklists on each one of your children for each developmental domain or subject area. A teacher must also consider the age of the children in the class. For school-aged children, teachers typically*

*decide which area of the curriculum to do a portfolio assessment in. That could be language arts, math, science, etc. For younger, preschool- aged children, the teacher must provide more information about each developmental area, because such a tremendous amount of growth and progress is observed here. In both cases, the portfolio must have a purpose. If it is lacking a purpose, the portfolio is merely a collection of children's work. It must carry meaning.*

2. In what schools have you observed authentic assessment, particularly portfolio assessment? Were they successful? What made them successful?

*I have not seen authentic assessment implemented into many schools, that's not to say that they do not exist or are not possible to implement. I feel that for a portfolio assessment to work in a school system the teacher must do an enormous amount of planning and invest a significant amount of time.*

3. If the format for a Focused Portfolio (Gronlund & Engel) were implemented as an assesment to be used in a public school (pre- K through 4th grade), what adaptations (if any) should be made to the assessment process or to the learning environment?

*The assessment process will have to be adapted considerably by the teacher in order to be used with school- age children. The teacher can take numerous liberties when designing an authentic assessment for students. It needs to be decided which area (s) of the curriculum to include, checklists, work samples, and observations. There are also certain advantages for doing a portfolio for school aged children. One is that the children have more involvement in the process because they get to choose which work samples they want to include in the portfolio. Also, the teacher has more liberties in*

*designing checklists or a set of criteria. The preschool portfolio differs in other preschool settings. For example, here [in the labs], the process is very detailed and writing is heavily emphasized. It is used here as a teaching tool for pre- service teachers. When implemented in other settings, it differs.*

4. Do you think that authentic assessment could replace (state- mandated)

standardized assesment in schools?

*Oh no. authentic assessment could never replace standardized assessments. Teachers and school systems need that normative, standardized data to compare and learn about children's progress and development. That standardization becomes increasingly important as children reach school age. Both types have their place in the education of a child.*

In conclusion, I feel that portfolio assessment carries many benefits to a child in the early childhood setting. I would like to see more assessment of this type implemented in the public schools. I have also learned that standardized assessment, while labeled with many flaws, is a necessary tool for schools as well. However, I have learned that while standardized and authentic assessment both have a place in education, neither one should be the only predictor of achievement and progress. They should be integrated and used for distinct purposes.

### References

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- Grace, C. (1992). *The portfolio and its use: Developmentally appropriate assessment of young children*. Little Rock, AR: Southern Early Childhood Association. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED351150)
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- Wortham, S.C. (2001). *Assessment in early childhood education*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) Upper Saddle River: Merrill Prentice Hall.

**Developmental Milestones Collection Form**  
**Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers Focused Portfolios**

Child's Name: \*\*\*\*\* \*\*

Age: 60 months

Observer: Jessica Holman

Date: 6/ 21/ 02

*Creative-Play Curriculum Developmental Checklist*

Check off the *most appropriate area of development* that applies:

- ☐ Personal Awareness
- ☐ Emotional Well-Being
- ☐ Socialization
- ☐ Communication
- ☐ Cognition
- ☒ Perceptual Motor
- ☐
- ☐
- ☐

The attached photo, work sample and/or anecdote illustrates the following *developmental milestone(s)* listed below:

- ☐ Perceptual motor:
- ☐ Body management and control/
- ☐ Rhythm, balance, and temporal awareness

**Check off whatever applies to the context of this observation:**

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Child-initiated activity | <input type="checkbox"/> Done with adult guidance          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher-initiated activity          | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Done with peer(s)      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> New task for this child             | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Time spent (1-5 mins.) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Familiar task for this child        | <input type="checkbox"/> Time spent (5-15 mins.)           |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Done independently       | <input type="checkbox"/> Time spent (15+ mins.)            |

**Anecdotal Record:** Describe what you saw the child do and/or heard the child say. Include what other children and adults did and/or said. Describe the context: people, activities, materials, environment. Include Comments section and Reflections section separately from anecdote.

*\*\*\*\*\* walks over to the music area. He picks up a bongo drum and sits on the floor by the music cart. He picks up the drum, takes the strap, and tries to pull it over his head. \*\*\*\*\* then sets the drum down on the floor. He stands back up and walks over to the music cart. He looks at the top of the cart and picks up a small drumstick. He sits back on the floor. \*\*\* is seated on the floor with a tambourine. \*\*\*\*\* takes the drumstick in his right hand and beats the drumstick with light- to- medium force against the drum 5 times. \*\*\*\*\* pauses for about 3 seconds and beats the drum again for a second time, this time using a medium- to- heavy force and beating it 8 times.*

Comments/ Reflections:

This anecdote highlights \*\*\*\*\*'s musical abilities. The music area is one of his favorite areas in the classroom. Although this observation is without dialogue, it demonstrates \*\*\*\*\*'s perceptual motor skills, his sense of rhythm, and how he uses an instrument. This observation shows the process \*\*\*\*\* goes through to explore the new instrument. \*\*\*\*\* figures out (independently) that the drum is not meant to be put around his body. However, he does not experiment with playing the drum with his hands. He uses his previous knowledge about drums to figure out how to play this one- that it requires a tool to beat it with. \*\*\*\*\*'s beats he makes on the drum are rather steady and controlled, rather than erratic, which shows that \*\*\*\*\* has control over rhythm and tempo.